

Overcoming obstacles to build affordable housing

EXECUTIVE SUITE

BY CHRISTINE GIORDANO
Special to Newsday

Jobco Inc. of Great Neck was one of the first construction companies to build affordable (Section 8) housing on Long Island in the 1970s, starting with a 104-unit development called Roslyn Plaza Gardens.

“People walked the campus and couldn’t believe it was subsidized housing. They thought it was a condominium project,” said president Robert Pascucci. Jobco went on to build about 10,000 units of affordable and market-rate housing in the tri-state area, including in Glen Cove, Hempstead, Ronkonkoma, Woodbury and Port Washington.

Pascucci, 64, joined the firm in 1980 with the skill set of both engineer and attorney, which eased his dialogue with architects and engineers and lent understanding on litigation and contract issues. Within six years he became company president and — believing that good property management is key to successful affordable housing — launched another company, JMI Management.

Jobco’s founder, Michael S. Puntillo, now 93, still comes to the office on most weekdays. “He takes fewer vacations than I do,” Pascucci said.

Tell me about the \$15 million housing project you’re building for veterans.

It’s new construction in Ronkonkoma for the not-for-profit organization Concern for Independent Living. It’s one- and two-story buildings in eight residential clusters, with a recreation building.

How is veterans housing different from typical affordable housing?

Veterans housing that I’m involved with is primarily rental, not home ownership, and it’s to give veterans a chance to get on their feet when they come back, with the hope that they will end up in a home ownership situation. But we need to bridge the needs of the return-



NAME: Robert Pascucci, president of Jobco Inc., Great Neck

WHAT IT DOES: Construction, real estate develop-

ment and property management

EMPLOYEES: 50

REVENUE: \$20 million

ing veterans, and all veterans.

Do you face much opposition with affordable housing when it comes to zoning, politics or community?

There is a lot of resistance. . . . Sometimes that tends to inadvertently create a situation where the affordable housing gets clustered into different communities or already impacted communities. We and the housing advocates try to create independent affordable housing in a diverse number of communities, and people tend to find that after these communities get built, it’s not as bad as they thought it would be. But NIMBYism is very hard to overcome.

Which projects are easier to get approved?

There is much less resistance to an affordable community for senior citizens.

What’s your advice to other developers when dealing with community opposition?

Reach out to the community early and often, because often people’s perception of a project is much more harsh than the reality. Rumors and gossip spread. But when you show the architecture and talk about the intended uses, you can gain community support.

For example?

Many years ago we did a project in Oyster Bay, and I reached out to the president of the civic association and explained we were going to build a senior citizen project in Woodbury. We met in her kitchen, had bagels and coffee and talked about the project. We also met with the neighbors on property adjacent to the development and explained the scope of the project. They asked us to make changes to the project [such as] the roof line and the vegetation, and not to work on weekends, and we agreed. When it came time to have the town board hearing, the supervisor opened it up for comments from the floor [and seemed surprised to see] the civic association president stand up in favor of the project. One of my fellow developers called me up and said, “How did you get the civic group to say something nice about you?” and I said, “I didn’t battle with them, I tried to cooperate with them.”

How long does it take to get a typical project approved?

It can take 1½ to five years or more to get a reasonably planned residential project through the process, and some of them take a lot longer.